Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — It can now be revealed that CIA agents have trained the elite units which guard favored foreign monarchs, premiers and dictators.

This has given the CIA contacts close to the seat of power, according to our sources, in such countries as Ethiopia, Indonesia, Jordan, Laos, Somalia, South Korea, South Vietnam and Thailand.

The CIA has been training palace guards for more than two decades. In the process, the CIA has quietly developed some bodyguards into informants and used others to influence palace policy-making.

Thailand is typical. The crack, 60-man protective force, which guards King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit, is directed by a trusted CIA trainee. He is Lt. Gen. Vitoon Yasawad, who also led the CIA's Thai irregulars in Laos until the 1973 ceasefire.

"Whoever controls the palace guard in Thailand, controls the crown," one Asia-wise, ex-CIA operative told us. He claimed the CIA has run the palace guard in Bangkok since the 1950s.

Once, high government officials escaped from one of Thailand's periodic coups and sought sanctuary in the basement of a CIA agent, our sources recall.

Fletcher Prouty, a former Air Force officer who had been attached to the CIA, described how the CIA saved former Prime Minister Sirit Thanarat in an even more dashing exploit. The prime minister was recuperating in a Tokyo hospital, Prouty told us, when a coup began to develop back in Bangkok.

The CIA rushed the ailing field marshal home in a U.S. military plane and the CIA-trained bodyguards responded with such a bristling display of efficiency that the coup was averted.

Yasawad's present protective force is armed with Thai-made, German-designed rapid-fire rifles and are skilled at handling explosives.

They were trained not far from the big U.S. base at Korat, which became a CIA subcenter during the Vietnam War and is still a major intelligence outpost.

Yasawad has adknowledged only the existence of his special 60-man protective force, which is called SWATS for Special Weapons and Tactics. He had denied any CIA connection with his elite unit.